DANCING ON A FLIGHT OF STEPS GIVES THRILLS

A scene from "The Passing Show of 1913" at the Winter Garden.

How the Novel Scene at the Winter Garden Was Constructed and the Chorus Taught to Work on It

WHO would think that a flight of steps could be thrilling? Thrilling in the same way that one admires the grandeur of a lofty mountain. In everyday life they are commonplace enough, but when staged they are a sensation.

At the Winter Garden they are doing what has never been done before. Instead of utilizing a flat surface upon which to drill the beauty chorus they have built a flight of steps that reaches from the footlights to the back wall and as high as the fly galleries and as wide as the proscenium opening. On this precipitous incline the girls perform evolutions that are kindred to the daily pranks of the fly. To date not a spangle has been lost nor a shin skinned, but at each performance the orchestra sits, breathless, waiting for the first human toboggan.

It's the first time in stage history—and this goes from Shakespeare to Reinhardt—that actors have made their entrance from the fly galleries. This is so high above the level of the orchestra that persons sitting in the balconies and even the rear orchestra seats wonder why the others are applauding, for they cannot see the top flights of steps and consequently miss the opportunity of extending a hand when a favorite appears.

These steps are really a little production within themselves. They occupy the entire stage when set up and when not in use there's barely room for the company to move about, for the whole place is literally cluttered up with steps, steps, nothing but steps. In the present "Passing Show of 1913" there were to have been two mechanical effects, but they had to be dispensed with (after having been built) because there wasn't room enough back of the scenes to take care of the paraphernalia when not in use. To be exact or to go into figures, there are thirty-two steps in all. They are constructed in multiples of four, this arrangement being necessary on account of the music. The top step is twenty-eight feet high, which means a height of thirty-five feet above the heads of those sitting in the first row of the orchestra. The depth is forty feet and the width thirty-two. In order for the company to enter the scene they climb to the topmost floor (which is one flight above the top floor of the dressing rooms) and land upon the fly galleries, there being one gallery on either side of the stage. Reaching from each gallery is a wooden and steel cantilever bridge twenty feet in length and three feet wide and able to support five tons. Blithely the little girls emerge from these dizzy heights to go through marches and dances which are done with such precision and abandon as to rob them of much of their intricacies and real danger.

"One false step," says Mr. Wayburn, the producer, "and my little bowling club would go to smithereens."

One can hardly realize the trouble and time required to train the girls to become used to the steps. They had to be taken, four at a time, and walked up four flights and then down. Then up eight and down. Then up twelve and down till the entire lot had been covered. It took weeks for some of the girls to become accustomed to walk, to say nothing of the dances. For every dance there had to be thirty-two steps and the evolutions of the chourus had to correspond rhythmically to the music. For instance the twelve little ranch girls gallop down the steps to sixteen bars of the music at a two-four tempo or double quick time and not one misses a step; if they did—well, the audience would see something for which it didn't pay.

Perhaps the most difficult march Mr. Wayburn had in teaching the chorus was the wooden leg march which the boys, dressed in G. A. R. uniforms, do. The gait was taught to the rhyme of:

There was an old soldier and he had a wooden leg,
He had no tobacco; no tobacco could he beg.

The most complicated number on the steps is called "Steps of Love" and in this the chorus performs the complicated buck walk. This is the song where the girls, dressed in black and white and numbering nearly 100, climb the stairs and by placing their caps and sticks upon white cloths, held in place by the boys, picture sheets of music which they are singing. Coming down the steps they break into the buck walk. This step is even difficult to do on a level surface. Needless to say it had to be taught the girls on the regular stage, and then came days and nights of extra rehearsing to fit in each step on the stairs. At rehearsal Mr. Shubert wagered that this particular step would create more applause than any other, but for some reason it does not. "It's because the girls are on the steps," says Mr. Wayburn, "and the audience cannot see all of the feet."

The concluding number on the steps, the pastel march, is the most impressive and by far the most spectacular. The entire company is costumed in pastel coloring and the manœuvring and deploying are all done with a view to bringing out each set of colors. They have to blend one into the other, and then there's the music to be considered. In order to get each set into place some girls may be marching in half time while others are doing double time.

The first big number is a march down the steps, the second a dance and march, which begins at the bottom of the steps, and the third the pastel march, which begins in the centre half way up the flight. There are, of course, several specialties by the principals, including a spirited toe dance down the steps by Miss Bessie Clayton, "the "Steps of Love" song by Miss Lois Josephine and what is described as a "Monkey Wrench Drag" by two male dancers.

In Mr. Wayburn's office at the Winter Garden is a flight of four steps. This flight served as a basis for building the present scene. It was the unit for the stage carpenter as well as the stage director. For example, the office steps have a rise of nine inches. This was found to be too much, for the little girls could not walk backward up the steps which had a rise of nine inches. This had to be reduced by an inch. George Williams, who builds all of the big Hippodrome scenes, was called upon to construct the steps, and he turned over after consuming the contents of several lumber yards the bare steps without any adornment. These were set up on the stage of the Winter Garden and then Law, the scenic artist, built the present scene, which shows the Capitol steps at Washington around them.

The massive flight is in four sections. The first or highest is stationary and is guyed off to the back wall. The cantilever bridges are also permanent. The other sections divide in two and fold back. They are then moved to various parts of the stage. The newell posts, ashlers and check pieces are quite numerous and require additional stage help in setting in place. In all twenty men must hustle to set up this scene in the required time of nine minutes. And while the stage hands are moving noiselessly about over twenty-two electricians are preparing the light effects which are brought into play back of the steps at the finale. When the act is on these electricians work under the stairs among never ending strands of cables and plugging boxes. These boxes, fifty in number, are square black affairs about the size of a cigar box. Each receives a main cable and sends out six other circuits which go to the circuits of strip lights back of each "riser" in the flight. At the signal from the head electrician these circuits flash blue, green and red, lighting up the steps from top to bottom. As the risers are built of gauze the effect is marvellous.

"In all of the work expended on these steps," says Mr. Wayburn, "what impresses me more than anything else is the amount of vitality eaten up by those little girls when they were compelled to ascend and descend the flight time after time. Just before the opening we were holding a rehearsal and three girls collapsed on the stairs. The inevitable happened—they simply hit the bottom.

"Nightly I stand in the entrance fearing an accident, but we have protected each girl by insuring her."

BACK TO OLD FARM AFTER TWENTY YEARS WANDERING

Returning Traveller Finds It Swamped in the Tide of Progress but Quaffs a Drink From the Old Spring, Which Revives Boyhood Memories

I sez to Sam—Sam Clough's his name, and he's our hired man—
"Le's go fishin' t'night down in Headley's pond. Ses Sam: "I d'no's I can.
"My old woman's purty nigh out 'o wood, 'n' I promised I'd cut her some,
"Or 'nough fr 'er washin' at any rate, ez soon ez my day was done.
"The pond is down—'n' ther' *ain't* much moon—'twont rise' 'fore half pas' ten,
"But 't looks some like we might have wind, 'n' ye wouldn't ketch no pout then."
And he slipped the bow under the nigh ox's neck and snapped the bow pin in,
And added, picking the clevis up: "Who'n *hell's* took my clevis, Jim?"

IN the oppressive air of a first class compartment of the "D-Zug" between Basel and Berlin he started early this summer to write "the greatest American pastoral," based on memories of a New England farm, memories dimmed by twenty years of wandering around the world. New Mexico and Calabria, Paris and Bombay, had dulled the glamour the woods and streams held for his boyhood, but it all came back as he began to write. He gave up the "pastoral" and started back home.

Twenty years—and the wanderer returned. He returned sorrowfully and with misgiving, for it was to be his only visit, and the return assumed something of the formality of a solemn farewell. He faced an ordeal rather than a pleasure.

It was accordingly with a sinking heart that he arose after passing the night in the town nearest the old place and hired a "livery rig" to carry him on the last stage of his journey. For some miles he drove through a straggling suburban community. The once sleepy and familiar thoroughfare had become an important link in a great State boulevard, over which flowed an endless stream of automobiles, which exemplified the material advancement of the nation.

Turning away from this main artery of travel he travelled over a once important highway, now showing grass springing up inside the wheel ruts, and passed groups of farm buildings in a state of dilapidation until he arrived at the most forlorn looking of all, the end of his journey. He reined the horse into the grass grown yard and led him to the ruined stable. The city bred hack hesitated and whinnied dubiously at the door as he sniffed the mouldy stable aroma.

The wanderer saw the once clean swept floor of the barn piled high with weedy hay. He saw hanging from the wall of the grain room the tattered remains of agricultural posters, some of which he remembered tacking there himself twenty years before. Here also was hanging, strangely at variance with its surroundings, the remn nts of a "trace" of seed corn, carefully selected and preserved, but destined never to be planted.

In the "water shed" the trickle of water into the hogshead, which had served as a container, was for ever silenced—the hogshead itself had collapsed into a mass of tangled hoops and staves. Near by, where the oxen used to stand, was a heterogeneous collection of rubbish. Here was the identical yoke referred to in the "pastoral," as well as a milking stool which once belonged to Sam Clough, its seat highly polished through long contact with his "overhauls"; a feeding box from which innumerable bran mashes had been lapped by eager tongues until half its original substance had been worn away; spade handles, "rake tails" and a score of other objects eloquent of another time.

In the lilac bushes beside the path from the house to the barn a woodchuck had made himself a home. Another was domiciled within a dozen yards of the old garden. In the early dusk of the evening a fox strolled leisurely from a clump of bushes behind the barn and stood there, curiously and impudently returning his observer's gaze.

Deer browsed freely in the fields and wildcats were roaming in the woods. Twenty years ago none of these creature were there, save traditionally, and one claiming to have seen a deer or wildcat was regarded pityingly, as one who had looked too long on the cider when it was hard.

The peach trees were dead. There remained only some mouldering stumps where the cherry trees stood. A single shoot of green on the Flemish Beauty tree bore one knotty pear. The apple trees, even the wild ones that were a perennial nuisance once, were now fruitless and dying.

So it was with the fields and meadows. In the fields the sweet European grasses were choked out by wild things and seemed to cry aloud for the plough; the meadows, encroached upon by the forest, had lost their old familiar air.

Like a lonely stranger in a big foreign city the returned traveller wanders from barn to garden, from orchard to field and meadow and pasture, seeking some spot bearing an air of familiarity to bid him welcome.

His footsteps lead him to the "spring woods," a narrow strip of woodland filling a ravine between two grass fields and traversed by a small brook. The upper portion of this he finds covered with dense underbrush out of all recognition, but lower down, where the stream passes out into what was once a meadow, no such metamorphosis has taken place. Beneath a large pine from among its very roots there once flowed a small but perpetual stream of clear cool water which accumulated in a moss rimmed, fern arched hollow. A drinking glass, inverted over a stick thrust in the bank for the purpose, was provided and certain buttressed, moss covered roots of the pine once afforded supremely comfortable seats within arm's reach of the running stream and thirsty men gathered to refresh themselves from the spring itself or from the delectable contents of some jug cooled by it and exchanged repartee or story.

The returning traveller found ferns growing as luxuriantly as ever, but the spring itself was dry or diverted and the moss rimmed hollow into which it once fell was filled with dead leaves. The wanderer cleared away the leaves, but no water ran. His attempt seemed doomed to failure and would have been abandoned had not the faint sound of trickling water been heard issuing from beneath the pine. Renewed efforts demonstrated that the stream still flowed, but that it had been diverted to a new channel. He filled up this channel and soon had the water running through the old one as clean as ever and falling with the gentle tinkle which is music to the ear of a thirsty man into the hollow beneath.

The prodigal settles back on the mossy buttress of the pine and allows the streamlet to fill his glass. He holds it, filled, to the light and sees that no tinge of color, no floating mote, dims its crystal purity.

Visions of the cafe lined boulevards of Paris and Marseilles, of the "Galleries" in Naples and Milan flash for a moment into his vision, only to be submerged in the joy of the present. Slowly and deeply he drinks while every detail in his surroundings stirs his boyish memories. A passing breeze whispers his secret to the pine, and as the whisper dies away all the fern fronds and leaves and twigs on the shrubbery nod a sympathetic welcome to the prodigal back among his own.

The silence, broken only by the soft murmur of falling water and the splashing of trout in pool, was suddenly disturbed. Heavy footsteps approached. A roughly clothed, grizzled man, exhaling a powerful aroma of plug tobacco, came into view. As he descended into the gathering shadow his gray hair seemed to grow black and his wrinkled face smooth.

"Well! if it ain't the boy! They told me ye'd come back. How be ye? I d'no ez there's anybody I'd ruther see."

"How are you, Sam? Come over and have some water. I've just been cleaning out the spring."

"Tastes jest like it uster, don't it. Say! do you remember that time when——"